

# The Art of the Tombstone: Cemetery Art and Symbols

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## Iconography

1: pictorial material relating to or illustrating a subject

**2: the traditional or conventional images or symbols associated with a subject and especially a religious or legendary subject**

3: the imagery or symbolism of a work of art, an artist, or a body of art

*(Source: Merriam-Webster.com)*

These symbols are typically chosen by the family of the deceased to represent the deceased in some way (life, vocation, hobby, interest, religious beliefs, etc.) and the symbols and meanings may vary widely around the world or even across parts of the United States. Having a general idea of what you're looking at may give you hints on where to look for records; plus, some of the symbols are beautiful to look at. New technologies are providing additional ways for loved ones to have the deceased represented on their tombstone with stone etching instead of or in addition to carving(s) and color can even be added in some cases.

Symbol	Meaning
Acorns	Strength
All-seeing eye	Freemasons or International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF)
Alpha and Omega	The beginning and the end
Anchor	Hope or steadfastness; sometimes Woodmen of the World
Anchor and chain or rope	United States Navy; also sometimes hope
Anchor with crossed cannons	Confederate States Navy
Anchors (double) with shield	United States Coastguard
Angels	Spirituality; angels are considered guardians as well
Arabic Writing	Islamic religions
Arch	Victory in death or door to salvation
Axe and chain	International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF)
Bed/crib	Child/youth or innocence; at rest
Bee with gun	Seabees (United States Navy)
Beehive	Freemasons or International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF); sometimes considered LDS symbol
Bellflower	Gratitude
Bells and doves	Marriage

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Bible	Christian religion; Freemasons; International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF)
Bird flying through gate	Resurrection; eternal life
BPOE	Benevolent Protective Order of Elks
Broken columns	Life cut off (too soon); decay; loss of the head of the family
Budding plants	Renewal of life
Butterfly or moth	Resurrection; human soul
Candles	Human soul
Cannon	Peace and rest
Castle	United States Army Corps of Engineers
Chain links (3) containing F-L-T (Friendship, Love, and Truth)	International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF)
Chain links (broken)	Death of a spouse or loved one
Chair (empty)	Peace and rest; sometimes youth/innocence/child; sometimes Woodmen of the World
Chalice (sometimes with letters IHS)	Sacrament
Checkered pattern	Represents good and evil
Cherub	Child/youth or innocence
Child (sleeping)	Child/youth or innocence (not dead, just sleeping)
Chrisma (XP)	Greek word for Christ - X (chi) and P (rho)
Circle	Eternity
Circle of Leaves	The Circle (women's auxiliary of the Woodmen of the World)
Circle with dot or smaller circle in the middle	Gone home; Boy Scouts of America (may have participated in Wood Badge training)
Clock face	Time; sometimes Benevolent Protective Order of Elks
Clover (four-leaf)	4H Club
Coffin	Mortality
Comedy and Tragedy masks	Thespian or theater performer or lover of the theater
Cornucopia	Fruitful life
Crescent	Muslim faith
Crests	Mayflower Society
Cross	Christian religion
Cross (Celtic or Irish)	May indicate the grave belongs to a priest or monk; sometimes indicates the deceased's culture/heritage
Cross (Greek - four arms equal length)	Symbol of the Christian religion; also Red Cross

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Cross inside crown surrounded by Maltese cross on top of two crossed swords	Knights Templar
Cross inside crown, sometimes with sword	Usually Knights Templar (part of Freemasons); also a symbol of the Christian religion
Cross with flames	Symbol of the Methodist religion
Crown with knight's head and crossed swords	Order of DeMolay (young men related to Freemasons)
Curtains/drapes	Mourning
Daffodil	Rebirth/resurrection
DAR	Daughters of the American Revolution
Dogwood tree	Symbol of Christian religion; divine sacrifice; resurrection
Dove (descending with twig or branch)	Descending to accompany soul to heaven; also Holy Ghost
Doves	Faith/innocence/peace
Dragon fly	Immortality or regeneration
Draped pall	Grief
Eagle	Military or patriotism
Eagle and shield on Fleur de lis	Boy Scouts of America
Eagle with stars and stripes	Liberty and vigilance (often seen on military markers)
Eagles (double) with pyramid and the number 32	Scottish Rite
Elk head	Benevolent Protective Order of Elks
FATAL	Order of the Eastern Star
FCB (stands for Friendship, Charity, and Benevolence)	Knights of Pythias
Ferns	Hope
Fish	Faith
Flags	Military or patriotism
Flame	Immortality or resurrection
Fleur de lis	Boy Scouts of America
Flowers and vines	Resurrection
Flying birds	Human soul
Forget-me-not	Remembrance
Garland	Glory or victory in death
Gates (usually open)	Entrance to Heaven
Girls (usually 3) inside a double triangle (usually purple)	Job's Daughters (young women related to or sponsored by Freemasons); symbol sometimes has the words IYOB FILIAE
Grapes	Sacrament; also represents Christ

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Grim reaper	Representation of death
Hand (pointing down)	Mortality or sudden death
Hand (pointing up)	Gone to Heaven or path to Heaven
Hands (clasped)	International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF); also farewell
Hands (holding)	Marriage; the person who died first holds the other's hand to guide them to Heaven
Hands (praying)	Prayer; faith
Hands holding Rosary beads	Symbol of the Catholic religion
Harp or lyre	Music; also praising God
Heart	Love; also marriage
Heavenly mansions	Victory
Hieroglyphs	Immortality
Hourglass	Freemasons or International Order of the Odd Fellows (IOOF)
Hourglass (with or without wings)	Urgency or time; time has expired
IHSV or In Hoc Signo Vinces (In This Sign Conquer)	Knights Templar
Infinity symbol	Eternity
Ivy	Strength; immortality; friendship
Knight	Victory
Lamb	Innocence (usually found on a child's grave)
Lamp	Immortality of the Spirit; resurrection
Laurel	Heroism; accomplishment
Lilies	Purity; sometimes Woodmen of the World
Lions	Strength; courage; guards the grave/tomb
Lotus blossom	Immortality
Masonry tools (chisel, hammer, trowel, plumb line)	Freemasons; may also represent deceased's vocation
Menorah	Judaism
Morning glory (flower)	Beginning of life
Mortar and pestle	Doctor or pharmacist
Mosque-shaped tombstone	Islamic religions
Oak leaves	Strength; power; authority
Obelisk	Immortality
OES	Order of the Eastern Star
Olive branch	Peace and rest
Owls	Messengers or messages
Palm fronds	Victory; rejoicing
Phoenix	Immortality
Pick and shovel	Mortality

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Pitcher	Judaism; traditional symbol for Levites
Poppy	Peace and rest; also World War I
Prayer Beads	Islamic religions
Pyramid	Immortality
Quran	Islamic religions
Rainbow above clasped hands and letter R inside triangle	Rainbow Girls (young women related to or sponsored by Freemasons)
Rosaries	Catholic religion
Rose	Love; beauty; hope (how open the bud is indicates how old the person was when they died)
Sawed off or broken tree trunks or branches	Woodmen of the World
Scimitar and 5-pointed star	Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AAONMS) or Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AEAONS); also known as Shriners
Scimitar with rose and crescent	Daughters of the Nile (Masonic)
Scottish thistles	Remembrance; also might indicate culture/heritage of deceased
Scroll	Symbol of life; also honor and commemoration
Scythe	Harvest of death
Seals	Military or patriotism
Shield mounted on a Formée cross	Knights of Columbus
Ships	Maritime career or hobby
Skull or skull and crossbones (Death's head)	Death
Snake swallowing tail	Eternity
Soldier with rifle and 5 stars	United States Army National Guard
Sorrowful angels, maidens, or cherubs	Grief
Southern Cross of Honor	Confederate veteran
Spheres	Peace and rest
Sphinx	Immortality
Spinning wheel	Heroines of Jericho (Masonic)
Spinning wheel over distaff with flax	Daughters of the American Revolution
Square and compasses (sometimes with letter G in the middle)	Freemasons
Staff of Asklepios with wings and double snakes	Doctor

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Staff of Asklepios with wings and letter V	Veterinarian
Stairs or steps	Ascension; stages; levels
Star (5-pointed) with pentagram	Order of the Eastern Star (points are sometimes colored blue, yellow, white, green, and red; sometimes shown with a pentagon and/or altar with Bible in the middle of the star)
Star (5-pointed) with wreath and letters US	American Legion
Star (GAR)	Grand Army of the Republic; most likely a Civil War Union veteran
Star of David (6-pointed)	Judaism
Sun	Light and warmth
Sunrise or sunset	Life ending or resurrection
Surrogate mourners	Grief
Swan-shaped carriage or boat	Child/youth or innocence
Torch (upright)	Immortality of the Spirit; resurrection
Torches (inverted)	Death
Toys	Child/youth or innocence
Tree	Life or everlasting life
Triangle pointed down, with axes or shield and/or knight's helmet	Knights of Pythias
Triple Tau (3 T's joined at bases) within a triangle surrounded by a circle (usually red)	York Rite
Trumpeters	Harbingers of the Resurrection
Urn	Immortality
Urn (shrouded or draped)	Peace and rest; death of an older person
Urn with flame	Undying remembrance
Vessel with flame	Eternal flame or eternal spirit
Vines	Woodmen of the World
Wheat or grain	Faith
Willow tree drooping over an urn or urn flanked by trees	Resurrection
Winged images (faces, skulls, angels)	Human soul; flight of the soul
Wings with crest	United States Air Force
Wings with parachute and star	United States Army Airborne
Wings with propeller	United States Army Air Corps
Wings with star and wreath	United States Army Master Aviator
WOW	Woodmen of the World
Wreath or laurel	Victory

### **Box Tomb**

Rectangular shaped grave marker which can be seen above ground with four sides and a slab top.

### **Epitaphs**

Epitaphs are inscriptions included on a tombstone as a remembrance of the deceased. It may represent an organization they were a member of, a religious belief, or the grief of loved ones and may appear in Latin or the native language of the deceased.

### **Ledger Stone**

Placed over the grave, ledger stones are usually flat on the ground and may contain inscriptions.

### **Obelisk**

Four-sided column that forms a pyramid at the top of the monument.

### **Pulpit Stone**

Resembles a lectern from a church pulpit. They may also look like an open book. The book may be a Bible or it may be The Book of Life.

### **Table or Tablet Stone**

Placed over the grave, table or tablet stones are usually ledger stones which sit on top of short columns, pillars or a cage underneath.

### **Additional Information**

- Don't forget to look at the entire tombstone, not just the front! Sometimes the back and even the sides of the tombstones have symbols on them.
- Never make a tombstone rubbing. While it may still be legal in some places, in others it is not and there's a potential of damaging the stone during the rubbing process.
- Photography Tips
  - DON'T use crayons, markers, pens, etc. on a tombstone to make it more readable
  - DON'T put flour or any other type of powder on the stone to make it more readable
  - DON'T use aluminum foil on the tombstone to make it more readable
  - DO use water to rinse off the stone but DON'T scrub the tombstone with a brush or sponge
  - DO utilize a reflective source or external light on a tombstone to make it more readable (consider keeping a reflective car sunshade, mirror, emergency blanket, or piece of aluminum foil in your cemetery kit or car)
- Tombstone cleaning: DO research how to properly clean a stone before undertaking that process; there are materials available for use that will be safe for the tombstone and make the job easier for you. The primary thing to remember is DO NO HARM to the stone. The Cemetery Conservators for United Standards (CCUS) has a great website which provides lots of information on cleaning, preservation, resources, and education (<https://cemeteryconservatorsunitedstandards.org/>).

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